

# Protocol for programme extension

8 October 2003

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## 1 Statutory framework

On 15 April 2003, the State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science requested NVAO, under Article 5a. 2 paragraph 4 of the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), to advise on the need for extending the length of academic higher education programmes. NVAO was requested to draft a regulation to this end. International comparative law programmes and Language & Culture programmes with a comprehensive language acquisition component needed to be given priority, as did research master's programmes. A protocol pertaining to these three types of programmes was established on 22 April 2003 and forwarded to the institutions. Meanwhile, it has already resulted in several dozens of applications.

The protocol set down in this regulation therefore concerns the other master's programmes that wish to be considered for extension.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Background

In consecutive documents, the then Minister Hermans and State Secretary Nijs are highly consistent with respect to the desirability of and options for programme extensions. To put it briefly, the position taken by the government is that programmes only qualify for extension if the quality of a programme is found to be insufficient from a national or international perspective on account of the course duration<sup>2</sup>. The Cohen Committee, requested by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) to advise on the extension of master's programmes as advocated by a number of discipline-specific consultative bodies, has also confirmed that there is no reason for a generic extension of curricula. However, the Cohen Committee has also pointed out the implications of international comparability and mobility, that could potentially lead to longer course durations.<sup>3</sup>

## 3 Elaboration by NVAO

From the above it follows that, in working out the State Secretary's request, NVAO is confronted with an essentially highly reticent attitude on the part of the government. The need for programme extension carries a heavy burden of proof. A programme is only considered for extension if its course duration causes the desired exit level of the Dutch programme to lag behind comparable programmes abroad, such to be confirmed by independent experts.

NVAO has taken the views of the Minister and State Secretary, as set down in the letters dated 27 May 2002 and 15 April 2003, respectively, as its point of departure for its assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> This protocol does not apply to research-oriented master's programmes, international comparative law programmes, and Language & Culture programmes requiring extraordinary efforts with respect to language acquisition. Such programmes are covered by the "Protocol for the assessment of the course duration studies of some specific academic higher education master's programmes", as set down on 22 April 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the Minister's response to the advice provided by the Council of State regarding the Bachelor's-Master's structure (Parliamentary Document 28024A), the Minister's letter to the Chair of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands dated 27 May 2002, and the State Secretary's letter to NVAO dated 15 April 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. report by the Cohen Committee.

This essentially leaves two options: drafting a generic framework now and substantiating such framework on the basis of subject-specific qualifications according to the discipline submitting the application, or waiting for an application to be submitted and subsequently developing a framework specifically tailored to each application, of course within the instructions provided by the Ministry. NVAO has opted for the first route. This has generated the following NVAO assessment framework.

### **3.1 Criteria**

In the assessment of applications for programme extension, NVAO will primarily focus on the question of whether the programme demonstrably requires extension of the curriculum in order to meet one or both of the criteria below:

- attaining the exit level desired from an international perspective. Neither expansion of the bachelor's programme nor the existence of programmes with longer curricula elsewhere constitute sufficient reason;
- attaining the exit level based on the requirements of the professional field. In this respect, the programme will need to demonstrate that the lack of a fifth course year is causing or has caused graduates who have completed the four-year curriculum to encounter serious impediments in their profession or in their further career.

### **3.2 Information dossier**

In the dossier underpinning the request for advice, the institution must provide an overview of the following:

- a description of the curriculum of the programme;
- a description of the attainment targets and the intended social impact of the programme;
- as far as existing programmes are concerned: how does the new curriculum relate to the old curriculum?;
- a comparison with (the exit level of) comparable programmes abroad;
- a substantiation of the necessity of extending the curriculum, preferably supported by opinions from independent experts, for example, assessment panels. In this respect, the institution must demonstrate that graduates who have completed the four-year curriculum have encountered or will encounter serious impediments in their profession or in their further career.

### **3.3 Procedure**

NVAO aims to provide the institution with its recommendations within a period of three months after the official requirements pertaining to the application have been met. The procedure entails that the board of the institution will be given the opportunity of responding to the draft recommendations set down by NVAO.